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III.—THE ACCENTUAL STRUCTURE OF ISOLABLE ENGLISH PHRASES

The purpose of this brief paper is to study the characteristic and prevailing accentual¹ rhythms of English prose in as far as these occur in phrases that can be detached from the context. Two types of such phrases have been examined. They may be distinguished as (1) phrasal idioms, and (2) titles. The first class embraces such examples as "in fact," "of course," "to be sure," "ebb and flow," "fits and starts"—the permanent "bromides" of the language, representing the most ordinary contacts of mind with mind, the most necessary aspects and currents of thought, and the homeliest logic. Stripped of every superfluity by incessant use, they exhibit with peculiar aptness the form and pressure of the language in its minuter elements.

The phrases of the second class are complementary to those of the first class in this respect, that whereas phrasal idioms have sprung up spontaneously and have been shaped by the give and take of intercourse, titles are the product of conscious selection or creation. An apt title is either chosen with great care from the common stock of phrases, or it is composed in the same way that a poem is composed, that is, as a work of deliberate art. If writers of drama and fiction spend weeks and even months in the framing of suitable titles for their works they do so with reason, for a title that is original and pleasing to

¹I shall use the term accent in the common or dictionary sense, without inquiring for the present whether accent has objective validity, or what is its relation to pitch, quantity, intensity, weight, attention-stress, impulse-waves, etc.

the ear may, by passing into the common vocabulary, actually outlast the work itself.

For the phrasal idioms I have drawn upon Roget's *Thesaurus of English Words and Phrases*, discarding all single words. Groups such as "to fall into evil," "to make both ends meet," etc., which can be detached only by throwing them into the infinitive or the imperative, have also been rejected for the most part. The total number of phrases examined is two thousand four hundred and ninety-four.

The titles I have taken from E. A. Baker's *Guide to the Best Fiction in English*, again discarding all single-word titles, and confining the selection to English and American works of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The total number of titles examined is four thousand two hundred and one.

In dealing with both classes of phrases I have been guided by a few simple rules. One is to recognize as accentual units all the possible permutations of accent in words of two, three, and four syllables. Another is to resolve phrases of five syllables or over into combinations of the shorter units wherever possible. The third rule is to divide the longer phrases only at a natural pause or joint, even though such a division compels the acceptance of one-syllable and of five-syllable units. This last rule, I am bound to say, I have not enforced as rigidly as the other two.

To designate the various accentual patterns, the terms of the Greek prosody, of course with the substitution of accent for quantity, are extremely convenient. At any rate, I have found nothing better.

Of the constituent elements of five-, six-, and seven-syllable phrases the patterns are so many that the ingenuity of man has not yet found names for them.

About the proper mode of scansion of certain phrases there will naturally be difference of opinion, just as there is about the scansion of verses; but such difference will not, I am sure, change the aspect of the data materially.

The results of the investigation are shown in the accompanying tables and diagrams.² In Table I and Diagram I it will be noticed that for both varieties of phrase as the number of syllables increases the curve mounts steadily to the peak and then descends in like manner. The majority of the phrasal idioms are, however, grouped about the three-, four-, and five-syllable region, whereas the majority of the titles are grouped about the four-, five-, and six-syllable region. It thus appears that the fiction writer inclines on the whole to a longer phrase than that preferred by the average intelligence.

Classifying the phrases as strong and weak, the strong being those that end with an accented syllable and the weak those that end with an unaccented syllable, we see in Table II and Diagram II that in the forms of two, three, and four syllables the strong endings are in excess, whereas in the forms of five syllables and over the weak endings are in excess. Furthermore, the number of strong endings diminishes pretty regularly as we pass from the lower to the higher number of syllables, and the number of weak endings increases in a similar proportion. The meaning of this distribution of the strong and weak phrases remains to be discovered. Doubtless there is some good reason why we should prefer "The Autocrat of the Breakfast Table" to "The Autocrat of the Breakfast Food," but as yet I have been unable to fix upon it. Perhaps the simplest and most plausible explanation is

²In both diagrams the figures at the bottom indicate the number of syllables, the figures at the side the percentages.

that the longer phrases, merely by virtue of their length, partake of the nature of sentences, and so allow or demand a cadence.

If we examine the phrases in detail (Table III), we shall notice some strongly marked preferences. The double iamb represented by "as large as life" in the phrasal idioms, and by "A Tramp Abroad" in the titles, is easily first in both classes. For the second place the cretic, the choriamb, and the trochee compete. Thus, if we examine the phrasal idioms, we find the cretic, represented by "inch by inch," standing next to the double iamb with 212 examples. Then comes the choriamb represented by "head over heels" with 139 examples, and fourth the double trochee represented by "food for powder," with 110 examples. In the titles this order is reversed. The double trochee, as "David Harum," follows the double iamb with 181 examples, the choriamb ("Barnaby Rudge") is third with 154 examples, and the cretic ("Bracebridge Hall") is fourth with 150 examples. If, however, we add together the corresponding figures from each list, the order is then double iamb, cretic, choriamb, and double trochee.³

In the remainder of the three- and four-syllable forms the order of preference is different in the phrasal idioms from what it is in the titles. In the former the order is

³I may refer here, in passing, to a controversy started by a remark of Professor Jespersen's in his *Growth and Structure of the English Language*. The remark is to the effect that the pattern "bread and butter," a double trochee, is far more common than the pattern "butter and bread," a choriamb. The data which I have now accumulated tend to show that the choriambic pattern is somewhat less frequent in the titles, somewhat more frequent in the phrasal idioms, and almost precisely of the same frequency in the two taken together.

as follows: 1. "in cold blood," 2. "to be sure," 3. "fair play," 4. "at close quarters," 5. "high living," 6. "a forlorn hope"; or, using the terms of the Greek prosody, anti-bacchic, anapaest, spondee, antispast, bacchic, and Ionic a minore. In the titles, on the other hand, the order is: 1. "The Black Arrow," 2. "The Day's Work," 3. "Green Mansions," 4. "Rob Roy," 5. "Seth's Brother's Wife," 6. "The Wide, Wide World," 7. "Peg Woffington"; or, in prosodic terms, antispast, anti-bacchic, bacchic, spondee, epitrite of the third form, epitrite of the first form, and Ionic a maiore.

A word may be said in regard to the paeon, since Aristotle considered it to be the characteristic prose foot. If we add together the figures for the four varieties of paeon which are now listed separately, this foot will stand seventh in both lists.

Other interesting facts are (1) the almost complete absence of anapaests among the titles, although they stand third in order of preference among the phrasal idioms, and (2) the paucity of single trochees in both types, there being but three among the phrasal idioms and none at all among the titles.

Turning to the phrasal idioms of five syllables, we find the most popular combinations to be as follows, in the order named: 1. "as clear as daylight," 2. "by hook or by crook," 3. "in common parlance" and "from pillar to post" (tied for third place), 4. "humanly speaking," 5. "to the manner born," and 6. "something or other"; or, iamb + amphibrach, iamb + anapaest, amphibrach + trochee, amphibrach + iamb, dactyl + trochee, paeon + monosyllable, and trochee + amphibrach.

A different order prevails in the titles. Here the pattern amphibrach + trochee, represented by "The

Trumpet Major," which was third among the phrasal idioms, stands at the head, followed by "The Boy Crusaders," "The Mill on the Floss," "The Woman in White," "Rattlin the Reefer," "Hurricane Hurry," "The Minister's Son," and "David Copperfield."

Of the six-syllable groups it is perhaps enough to say that the form iamb + paeon (third form) represented by "the pink of perfection," is first among the phrasal idioms, and the form amphibrach + anapaest, represented by "The Pilgrims of the Rhine," is first among the titles.

In the remaining groups the variety of the combinations makes it difficult to draw conclusions. One point, however, is worth noting, namely, that the favorite form of the dochmiac, or five-syllable foot, which it is necessary to recognize in the longer phrases, is of the pattern represented by the phrase "of necessity," that is, an accented syllable preceded and followed by two unaccented syllables.⁴

I will add what, I hope, will be a pleasing *divertissement*, namely, an examination of the titles of the best sellers for the past ten years as shown by the monthly lists in the *Bookman*. Of 220 titles which take the form of phrases, seven are of two syllables, thirty-eight of three, sixty of four, fifty-three of five, forty-one of six, twenty-one of seven, ten of eight, one of nine, and two of ten syllables. It will be seen that the proportion of titles to syllables is about the same as in the longer list. Curiously enough, however, the highest point is reached in the four-syllable

⁴In view of the great interest that has attached of late to studies in the Latin *cursus*, it may be well to say that there seems to be no significant correspondence between the rhythms of the various types of *cursus* and the rhythms of the phrases that I have been studying. If there is a resemblance anywhere, it is in a form of the *planus* type, namely, dactyl + trochee, which is fairly common in five-syllable phrases.

type, an indication that the authors of the best sellers, whether by craft or by instinct, chose a length suitable to the popular comprehension. As regards the accentual structure, the order of the five highest on the list is as follows (the titles being used as examples of the patterns): "The Common Law," double iamb; "The Harbor," amphibrach; "The Rosary," paeon; "The Devil's Garden," paeon + trochee; and, "Andrew the Glad," choriamb.⁵

Any general conclusions deduced from so limited an area of observation must necessarily be of a tentative character. Nevertheless, the following can be put forward with some confidence as fairly inferable from the data.

1. That the English language inclines in ordinary speech to a phrase of four syllables.

2. That strong endings are more common in the shorter phrases, weak endings in the longer phrases.

3. That beginning with two-syllable phrases, the proportion of weak to strong endings increases regularly with the number of syllables.

4. That the prevailing accentual structure of two-syllable phrases is the spondee, of three-syllable phrases is the cretic, of four-syllable phrases is the double iamb,

⁵ In the same way I have examined a considerable number of the trade names used in advertising, including, however, single-word names. The results are as follows: The three-syllable type stands first with 28.6% of the whole number. The two-syllable type is second with 22.9%, the four-syllable type third with 18%, the five-syllable type fourth with 10.5%. As regards the distribution of the different kinds of feet, the trochee, represented by Mazda, is the preferred form. Then in descending order come the cretic, the double trochee, and the amphibrach, the last two tied for third place: To use specific examples, the preferred order is: 1. Mazda, 2. Cream of Wheat, 3. Nabisco and Prophylactic.

of five-syllable phrases is iamb + amphibrach, of six-syllable phrases is iamb + paeon.

5. That the titles of works of prose fiction show virtually the same peculiarities, except that five-syllable titles are somewhat more frequent than four-syllable titles, and that the preferred pattern of the five-syllable title is amphibrach + trochee, of the six-syllable title is amphibrach + anapaest.

6. The prevailing rhythm of English speech, as far as it depends upon the accent of phrases, is iambic, cretic, or choriambic rather than trochaic.

FRED NEWTON SCOTT.

DIAGRAM I

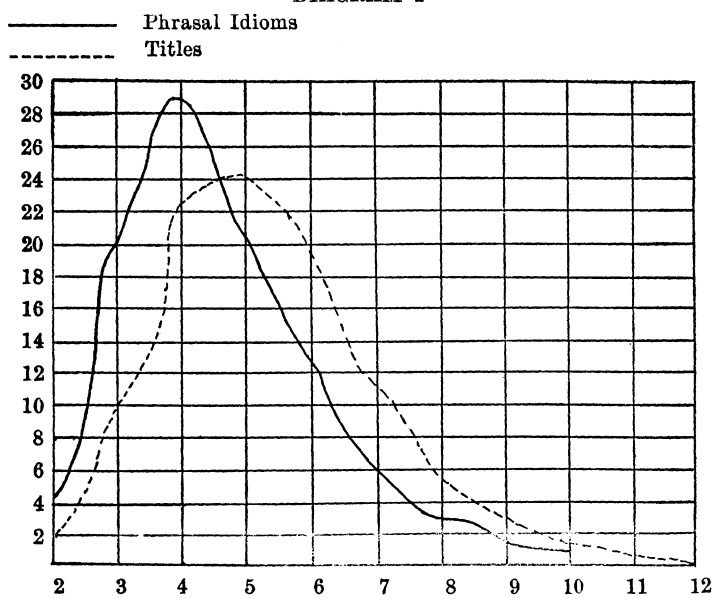


DIAGRAM II

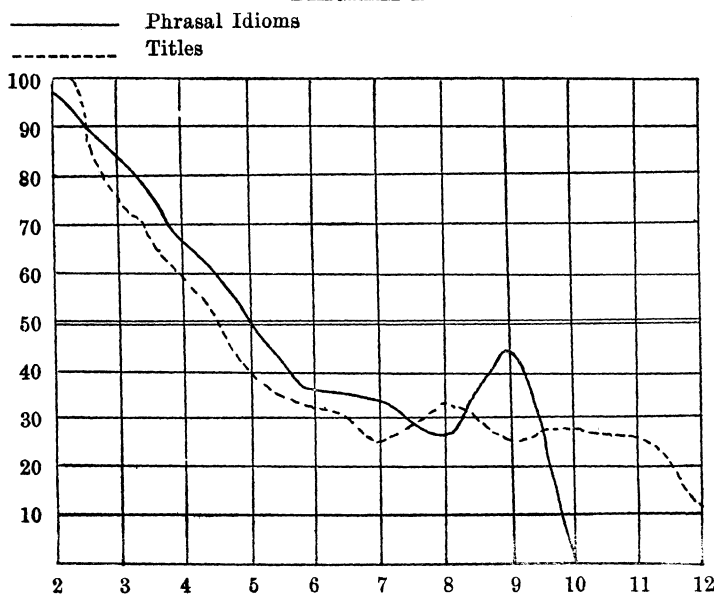


TABLE I
DISTRIBUTION ACCORDING TO LENGTH OF PHRASE

Number of Syllables	Phrasal Idioms		Titles	
	Number of Phrases	Percentage	Number of Phrases	Percentage
2	109	4	67	1.6
3	500	20	384	9
4	738	29	978	23
5	548	21	1013	24
6	344	13	848	20
7	150	6	473	11
8	65	2.7	226	5
9	29	1.1	113	2.6
10	11	.4	51	1.2
11			21	.9
12			18	.4
13			5	
14			3	
15			1	
	2494		4201	

TABLE II
PROPORTION OF STRONG AND WEAK ENDINGS

No. of Syllables	Phrasal Idioms			Titles		
	No. of strong endings	No. of weak endings	Percentage of strong endings	No. of strong endings	No. of weak endings	Percentage of strong endings
2	106	3	99	67	0	100
3	411	89	82	297	87	77
4	494	244	67	595	383	60
5	234	284	48	399	614	39
6	127	217	37	296	552	34
7	51	99	34	129	344	27
8	18	47	27	73	153	32
9	13	16	44	30	83	26
10	0	11	00	15	36	29
11				6	15	28
12				2	16	11

TABLE III
PHRASES OF 2 TO 4 SYLLABLES

Number of Syl- lables	Phrasal Idioms			Titles	
	Typical Examples	Accentual Structure	Number of Phrases	Number of Phrases	Typical Examples
2	in fact	• ^	28	3	The Huns
2	fair play	^ ^	78	64	Rob Roy
2	thank you	^ •	3		
3	so be it	• ^ •	33	18	The Portent
3	to be sure	• • ^	89	7	In the Blood
3	in cold blood	• ^ ^	100	117	The Day's Work
3	far from it	^ ^ •	51	66	Green Mansions
3	inch by inch	^ • ^	208	150	Bracebridge Hall
3	pardon me	^ • •	4	3	One of them
3	blind-man's buff	^ ^ ^	14	23	God's Good Man
4	at close quarters	• ^ ^ •	74	132	The Black Arrow
4	head over heels	^ • • ^	136	154	Barnaby Rudge
4	as large as life	• ^ • ^	286	350	A Tramp Abroad
4	God bless my soul	^ ^ ^ ^	2	1	Free Soil, Free Soul
4	food for powder	^ • ^ •	104	181	David Harum
4	a green old age	• ^ ^ ^	16	26	The Wide, Wide World
4	live and let live	^ • ^ ^	4	17	Puck of Pook's Hill
4	three score and ten	^ ^ • ^	8	30	Seth's Brother's Wife
4	half seas over	^ ^ ^ •	6	20	Auld Licht Idylls
4	Job's comforters	^ ^ • •	8	25	Peg Woffington
4	in the long run	• • ^ ^	37	17	The Divine Fire
4	lie upon it	^ • • •	2		
4	in general	• ^ • •	15	10	The Egotist
4	with a vengeance	• • ^ •	35	15	The Virginians
4	that is to say	• • • ^	5		

TABLE IV

I. THE MOST COMMON VARIETIES OF 5-SYLLABLE AND 6-SYLLABLE
PHRASES IN ORDER OF FREQUENCY

5-Syllable, with Strong ending:

by hook or by crook	(• ^ • • ^)	The Mill on the Floss	(• ^ • • ^)
from pillar to post	(• ^ • • ^)	The Woman in White	(• ^ • • ^)
castles in the air	(^ • • • ^)	The Ministers Son	(• ^ • • ^)
to the manner born	(• • ^ • ^)	Barlasch of the Guard	(^ • • • ^)
the prodigal son	(• ^ • • ^)	At the Villa Rose	(• • ^ • ^)
		As the Twig is Bent	(• • ^ • ^)

5-Syllable, with weak ending:

as clear as daylight	(• ^ • ^ •)	The Trumpet Major	(• ^ • ^ •)
in common parlance	(• ^ • ^ •)	The Boy Crusaders	(• ^ • ^ •)
humanly speaking	(^ • • ^ •)	Rattlin the Reefer	(^ • • ^ •)
something or other	(^ • • ^ •)	Hurricane Hurry	(^ • • ^ •)
in strict confidence	(• ^ ^ • •)	David Copperfield	(^ • ^ • •)
open sesame	(^ • ^ • •)	The King's Deputy	(• ^ ^ • •)

6-Syllable, with strong ending:

as sober as a judge	(• ^ • • • ^)	The Pilgrims of the Rhine	(• ^ • • • ^)
like a thief in the night	(• • ^ • • ^)	The Luck of Roaring Camp	(• ^ • ^ • ^)
by force of argument	(• ^ • ^ • •)	When Wilderness was King	(• ^ • • • ^)
		In the Wake of the War	(• • ^ • • ^)

6-syllable, with weak ending:

the pink of perfection	(• ^ • • • •)	The Shadow of Allah	(• ^ • • • •)
at sixes and sevens	(• ^ • • • •)	The Wings of the Morning	(• ^ • • • •)
as wise as Solomon	(• ^ • ^ • •)	The Little Minister	(• ^ • ^ • •)
a howling wilderness	(• ^ • ^ • •)	A Midsummer Madness	(• ^ • • • •)
in various places	(• ^ • ^ • •)	A Rose of Yesterday	(• ^ • ^ • •)
on the road to ruin	(• • ^ • • •)	Burglars in Paradise	(^ • • • • •)

II. EXAMPLES OF LONGER PHRASES

From one end to the other	(• ^ • • • •)	Diana of the Crossways	(• ^ • • • •)
as different as chalk		All Sorts and Condi- tions of Men	(• ^ • • • •)
from cheese	(• ^ • • • •)	The Little Shepherd of Kingdom Come	(• ^ • ^ • •)
as plain as the way to parish church	(• ^ • • • •)	The Autocrat of the Break- fast Table	(• ^ • • • •)
conduct unbecoming a gentleman	(^ • • • • •)		